

Prock Hill Road

(Written June 30, 2000)

The other day I happened to be at Town Hall and saw George Wilber pouring over some detailed highway plans. It turns out that the road in question was Prock Hill Road, situated in Colebrook's northwest corner. The northern end of this road presently ends (unless you happen to own a Jeep) about a quarter of a mile short of the Massachusetts line. Property owners along this unimproved roadway wish to build homes, and the town is required to make it passable, in this case, by August of this year.

In the interest of preserving historical records, I thought a walk with my camera was in order while there was time to record what the road looked like prior to its being visually altered for all time. You see, Prock Hill Road is no ordinary highway; in fact it is one of the most historically significant thoroughfares in this section of Litchfield County.

Its first name was "Highway Number 3", and the Colonial Legislature required its construction to facilitate troop movements from the populated Connecticut River Valley and coastal regions toward Albany and the upper Hudson River Valley during the French and Indian War in the 1760s. In Colebrook, it was to begin at the present intersection of Smith Hill Road and the Old North Road and to proceed northward along what is today Smith Hill Road, through the Center, north along Conn. Route 183 to North Colebrook, then up Prock Hill Road past YMCA Camp Jewell and straight on as far as present road conditions permit. There were other roads serving the same purpose, Greenwoods Road being one. Greenwoods was ordered to be passable by team and horse by November 20, 1761. The following year the survey of the route of Highway Number 3 was completed, work began, and on October 17, 1765, the General Assembly, seated in New Haven, was asked to accept the laying out of Highway Number 3. They did so, and we may conclude that the road was officially open for use on that date. It is doubtful that the people in town ever called this road anything except the Sandisfield Road. All of our land records refer to it as such, and the school district that stretched from Colebrook Center to the Mass. Line was the Sandisfield Road District.

Around the beginning of the nineteenth century, the era of turnpikes was ushered into existence in this corner of Connecticut. Of course the Sandisfield Road was a prime consideration, and in 1801 was renamed the Waterbury River Turnpike in Connecticut and the 15th Massachusetts north of the state boundary. It remained a turnpike until 1850, when the turnpike owners, realizing that it was never to be a profitable venture, surrendered its charter and the tollgates were thrown open. The town must have come to the same conclusion a quarter of a century later, for at a town meeting held October 1874, the voters determined "to discontinue upkeep on the road from the Luman Bidwell place to the state line on Prock Hill." The status remained as such until 2000.

One contributing factor to the demise of the road as a profitable investment became evident as I walked the half-mile or so that straddles the state line. A few hundred yards south of the Sandisfield line there is a roadway of sorts going off to the east. It didn't look like a lumber road, nor did it have the appearance of an old farm road. The land slopes here, and heavy stones were employed on the downhill side; a sure sign of a road built to last. After a short distance it began to curve to the left (north) and after two or three hundred yards, the crest was reached. Once in Sandisfield, there were unmistakable signs of it having been farmed at some point in the distant past. Just

beyond the crest the land slowly descended and a swampy area was encountered. At this point I was about to turn back, when it became apparent that there was a bright area in the forest indicating a clearing, or perhaps a body of water. In less than one hundred yards I emerged from the woods, and stood open-mouthed. I had emerged on the Old New Hartford Road not more than one hundred yards from the point where I had turned back a short time before. This is no more than three or four hundred yards north of the Colebrook town line. What this means is that the locals (I assume) had created a road known as a "shunpike". Shunpikes abounded in America during the era of the turnpikes, "to shun", means to avoid, thus it was a road that paralleled, or in some way by-passed the toll station so as to avoid paying the toll. Until now, there hasn't been a clear-cut example of such a road in Colebrook. The tollgate being avoided here was one hundred feet or so north of the state boundary.

There were no "No Trespassing" signs on the Colebrook side, but when I emerged at the Sandisfield end, there was a bright yellow sign stating the property belonged to Burton K. Millard. How appropriate that this historic land should belong to a family that has lived and worked in this area for more than two hundred years. Now I have a big problem; what will I say to Babe when he finds out that I've been trespassing all over his land?